

# **“Socialism From Above” and the Capitulation to Fascism**

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**In 1930s Europe, Hendrik de Man’s bid to replace class struggle with state planning led to a deadly embrace with fascism. His attempt to graft nationalism onto socialism offers a terrible lesson for social democrats today who adapt their politics to far-right ideas.**

Hendrik de Man didn’t fight back against the Nazi takeover. Dissolving the once-formidable Belgian Workers’ Party (BWP) as German troops invaded his country in June 1940, he instead advocated collaboration with Europe’s new overlords. Rather than “resist” Nazi Germany, the Belgian socialist told his comrades that they should “accept the fact of its victory and try to draw lessons from it in order to initiate a new form of social progress.” He insisted that “far from being a catastrophe this collapse of a decayed world represents liberation for the working classes and for socialism . . . ”

These words had a particularly powerful effect because in his day de Man was among Europe’s most famous and influential socialist thinkers. He was most notable for his “[Plan of Labor](#)” — or “Plan de Man” — which advocated far-reaching state planning and intervention within existing capitalist frameworks. Its proposals for public works and the nationalization of credit and monopoly industries — popular among social-democratic militants looking for immediate, concrete alternatives — developed in parallel and sometimes in dialogue with emerging Keynesian economics and the New Deal policies in the United States.

As a political movement “planism” became popular in the 1930s not only among Belgian workers, but also among “neo-socialists” across Europe. Similar Plans of Labor were drafted in the Netherlands and in Switzerland, and in France the right-wing of the Socialist French Section of the Workers’ International (SFIO) was also attracted to de Man’s planism. Led by Marcel Déat, René Belin, and Pierre Renaudel, the French neo-socialists argued that the rise of fascism showed the urgent need to introduce state-planned capitalism as opposed to the traditional strategies of gradual reformism or waiting for the revolution to come.

In fact, the neo-socialists’ recipes shared the vision of a state-led, nation-based, corporatist compromise between labor and capital that was also being promoted by fascist and Catholic ideologues. As “national” socialists faced with a disintegrating parliamentary democracy, neo-socialists increasingly flirted with fascism, anti-Semitism, and political authoritarianism — many, like Déat and Belin, joined the Vichy regime after the French capitulation to Nazi Germany. De Man himself cooperated with the Nazi occupiers of Belgium in hunting down rival socialists.

After World War II, de Man was convicted in absentia for political collaboration and sentenced to twenty years in jail — ending his political career. But he also functions as a cautionary tale for today. Beleaguered by far-right parties capturing its voter base, today we again see social democracy tempted to graft the nationalist, repressive, and racist discourses of its opponents onto social policies that now exclusively serve its “own people.” In this sense, the new [biography](#) of de Man by Dutch historian Jan-Willem Stutje can be seen as a timely intervention in the contemporary debate.

## The Book

As a work of biography, Stutje's book, of course, zooms in on the personal life and work of de Man. Nevertheless, he does not want to give the impression that history consists of the thoughts and actions of "great men." Stutje uses political biography not as an end in itself, but as a methodology — a specific lens through which issues such as socialist leadership and the history of the Left can be investigated and understood. The personal story of de Man reveals the "dark side" of Belgian and European social democracy in the first half of the twentieth century.

The first part of the book, *From Militant to Military*, deals with the youth of "Rik" de Man, the start of his political commitment, his participation in World War I, and his stay in the United States. In the period before World War I, the young Rik evolved from an anarchist, revolutionary syndicalist to a Marxist who closely followed the doctrines of the Second International. In 1911 he became secretary of the Central for Workers' Education. Here, Stutje describes a first ideological turning point, in which de Man abandoned his previous sympathies for [Rosa Luxemburg's ideas of the mass strike](#), spontaneity, self-organization, and direct action, in favor of gradual, institutionalized worker education.

Already at this juncture, the seed had been planted that would ultimately — after much further fertilization — grow into de Man's 1930s authoritarianism. Already, Hendrik had lost faith in the possibility of workers' political self-emancipation and their own economic self-management. When World War I broke out, the previously pacifist de Man instead volunteered to join the Belgian army. Indeed, the war drove a patriotic reflex among many socialists who identified themselves with their Belgian homeland. While for many Marxists the Russian Revolution of 1917 confirmed the agency of the working class, this world-shaking event instead sowed apprehension and frustration in de Man's mind. Together with Belgian socialist leaders Emile Vandervelde and Louis De Brouckère, he traveled to Petrograd in April 1917 to convince the revolutionaries not to withdraw from the war — albeit without much success. His trip to the United States in April 1918 as a member of a government delegation to study Taylorism made a much greater impression on the young socialist.

The experience of the beastliness of industrial warfare, but also of the nobility, solidarity, and sense of duty among ordinary soldiers — regardless of economic class positions — transformed de Man's worldview. He took an interest in social psychology, becoming a university lecturer during his second stay in the United States between 1919 and 1921. The title of the second part of Stutje's biography, *Remaking of the Minds*, is a reference to Hendrik's first book, *The Remaking of a Mind* (1919), which focused on the need to educate and elevate the proletariat. De Man rejected Marxist-Hegelian dialectics and the idea of class struggle in favor of evolutionary principles and nation-based social engineering. Stutje pointedly describes how de Man already here embraced elitist, paternalistic, social-Darwinist, and eugenic ideas far before his open collaboration with Nazism in 1940.

Through the lens of his biographical focus on de Man, the historian criticizes a whole generation of Belgian Social Democratic leaders who were anything but immune to the growing authoritarian, anti-Semitic, and eugenicist ideas of interwar Europe. One of the most important conclusions of Stutje's work is that de Man's supposed "deviations" were not exceptional at all, but commonplace among a large number of socialist leaders at that time. De Man's "mistake" was that he would be the only one among his party members to pursue this gradual ideological fusion of social democracy and fascism to its full logical consequence: collaboration with Nazi Germany.

Hendrik returned to Germany where in 1926 he published his key work *Zur Psychologie des Sozialismus*. It was translated into Dutch, French, Spanish, Swedish, Czech, Italian, Yiddish, and into English as *The Psychology of Socialism*. The book was a scathing critique of social democracy,

highlighting the contradictions between the movement's revolutionary Marxist propaganda and its reformist practice, and between the determinist theory of historical materialism and the voluntarist notion of class struggle. If a worker's consciousness is determined by her position in existing relations of production, by her social being in a capitalist context, how can this consciousness ever be revolutionary and anticapitalist?

De Man concluded that the misguided practice of social-democratic reformism was the result of an incorrect Marxist theory of human nature and the nature of history. The lower classes did not display a revolutionary consciousness, but rather a social inferiority complex and a vague sentiment of the need for cooperation and social justice. In de Man's thinking human psychology — will, motivations, emotions, values — *has* to be independent of social conditions in order to change them. Not the class struggle, but education toward the creation of a new consciousness, a new "Man," would lead to socialism. Consequently, the elevated idea of socialism did not arise organically from the material struggle of workers and other subaltern groups, but had to be introduced to the proletariat by enlightened thinkers, such as de Man himself.

*Psychology of Socialism* was widely discussed among both right- and left-wing intellectual circles in Europe and beyond. Sympathy for the work came from libertarian communists such as Henriette Roland Holst, liberal thinkers such as Benedetto Croce, and nationalist socialists such as Marcel Déat. However, the book was also celebrated in nationalist and conservative circles.

Within Germany's mass Social-Democratic Party (SPD), bureaucrats such as Gustav Noske and Karl Kautsky criticized the work relentlessly, as they were hostile toward any theoretical criticism, either left or right, of the reformist policies of social democracy. Outside Germany, communist intellectuals such as Soviet philosopher Abram Deborin and French historian Charles Rappoport dogmatically attacked de Man because of the mere fact that he deviated from established Marxist doctrine. Other Marxists, such as the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci, articulated a more sophisticated critique. Gramsci situated de Man's work within a broader reaction against the "vulgar materialism," "classic positivist method," and "poor speculative ability" of Second-International Marxism.

Gramsci appreciated de Man's attention to the everyday experiences, sentiments, and spontaneous conceptions of the working class: "his book does reflect, pedantically, a real need: the need to get to know the sentiments of the people and not to regard them as something negligible and inert within the movement of history." At the same time, Gramsci ruthlessly criticized de Man because "he stops halfway, by endorsing a conception of human events as generated by 'psychological motives' and social 'complexes' . . . think[ing] he made great discoveries because he repeats the description of empirical facts as if it were a scientific formulation: a typical case of positivism . . . " Instead of incorporating the social psychology of the masses into Marxist theory as an important factor, de Man replaced politics with psychology.

During his stay in Germany, de Man flirted with the so-called left wing of the emerging NSDAP, led by Georg and Otto Strasser. He entertained the idea that socialists could form a united front with the "anti-capitalist" tendency within the Nazi party in order to stop Hitler. Although de Man considered Hitler an illiterate parvenu, he admired European socialists from the "generation of the front," such as Oswald Mosley, who became the leader of the British Union of Fascists, and especially the Italian Fascist leader Benito Mussolini. In 1930, he wrote to Il Duce: "It is precisely because I fear that I misunderstand certain aspects of fascism that I follow its development with the greatest interest." He could just as well have asked the persecuted Italian socialists and communists about the realities of Fascism . . . or at least his colleagues at the Frankfurt School, who were critically analyzing fascism. Yet de Man showed no interest in their work.

## **Plan of Labor**

In 1933 de Man developed a political and economic program to combat both the economic crisis and the lure of fascism: the Plan of Labor. De Man sought to offer a radical, but not revolutionary, answer to the dead-end reformism of the Belgian Workers' Party. Socialism was here back on the agenda, not as an international overthrow or gradual adjustment of capitalism, but as a national, structural transformation of the capitalist state and economy: the nationalization of the credit sector, monopolies, transport, and energy; a state-led, planned industrial production; national class unity against international financial capital; and a strong, corporatist state that would stand above the ins and outs of party politics.

De Man was not the first to experiment with state planning. He drew on the existing literature, for example, Bertrand Jouvenel's *L'économie dirigée* (1928), and was inspired by concrete examples of economic planning such as Wladimir Woytinsky's 1932 proposal to stimulate Germany's recovery through public works and state-sponsored employment. Such proposals were originally situated at the international level, but increasing competition, protectionism, and militarization in the interwar period led de Man to the conclusion that "planism" was only possible within the limits of the nation-state.

At the BWP's congress in December 1933 the membership enthusiastically accepted the Plan despite criticisms from both reformists, who were afraid the proposals were too radical, and revolutionary socialists, who saw the Plan as a capitulation to corporatism and even fascism. While the BWP had obtained an impressive 36 percent of the vote in 1929 and 37 percent in 1932, it had been unable to break the pro-capitalist coalition between liberals and Catholics. By forging an alliance between the state, workers, intellectuals, and "productive," "national" capitalists, the Plan appeared to open up the possibility of breaking the electoral deadlock and changing society to the benefit of the common good.

The socialist trade unions lauded the Plan because it would reduce widespread unemployment, which was leading their organizations to bankruptcy as they were the ones paying out welfare benefits. And the Plan soon gained a mass following. In 1934 the BWP began to wage propaganda for the Plan on a scale unseen in Belgian and probably European politics. The merits of the Plan were praised in mass meetings, journals, pamphlets, plays, songs, films, and radio interviews. Propagandists went around the country to educate people. Huge posters of Hendrik de Man, sternly gazing with his characteristic pipe in his mouth, explicitly connected de Man to his genius.

Although the Plan excited the workers' movement, de Man did not intend to implement structural reforms "from the bottom up" through the pressure of strikes and demonstrations, but by entering into alliances with "productive" and "national" factions of the Belgian bourgeoisie. He had his opportunity thanks to the fall of the liberal-Catholic government in November 1934, which prompted the Catholic politician Paul van Zeeland to seek a rapprochement with de Man's BWP. De Man agreed to participate in the government of "national unity" on the basis of a weak state-interventionist policy of currency devaluation and employment programs, without the inclusion of any of the Plan's far-reaching structural reforms. This, even though the party congress of 1933 had decided that the BWP would only join a coalition government if the Plan was fully implemented.

This castrated version of the Plan not only failed to meet the high expectations of the workers' movement, but was unable to even secure a Belgian New Deal, providing no large-scale state investments or public works. As minister of public works and employment (in 1936) or, indeed, as minister of finance between 1936 and 1938, de Man did not succeed in controlling and subjugating the private banking sector. Ultimately, the inclusion of the BWP in the coalition government was a ploy by the liberal and Catholic parties to stabilize and pacify the militant socialist strike movements of the 1930s.

Disappointed with the powerlessness of bourgeois democracy, de Man invested his hopes in an “authoritarian democracy” headed by King Leopold III. De Man was not alone in this venture: after 1936 there was a factional struggle in the BWP between those who defended democratic socialism and those who advocated the authoritarian “national socialism” of de Man and his confidant Paul-Henri Spaak. A year after the death of Emile Vandervelde in 1938, Hendrik de Man became party chairman. The ideological rapprochement with fascism was also expressed in attitudes toward Belgian foreign policy: in 1938, at the insistence of “productive capital” and Leopold III, the Spaak government normalized trade relations with the far-right leader Francisco Franco — even before the Spanish Republic was defeated.

In the context of the increasing threat of war, de Man defended a policy of neutrality for Belgium — also the position of Leopold III. When war erupted, de Man saw Nazism as a vital force that would smash the corrupt democratic order. In June 1940 he issued a manifesto to disband the BWP and call on socialists to collaborate with the New Order. From this point he actively aided the occupiers in suppressing trade union and socialist activism, often using his position to liquidate political and personal enemies, such as the socialist professor Henri Rolin.

Even here, his plans soon failed. How disappointed were de Man and King Leopold III when Hitler did not support a Belgian pseudo-independence similar to the French Vichy regime! De Man eventually lost his position as a confidant of the occupiers, who ordered him to stop interfering in politics. He withdrew, embittered, to France’s Haute-Savoie region.

In 1944, with the Allies sweeping across France, de Man fled to neutral Switzerland. On September 12, 1946 he was sentenced *in absentia* for his political collaboration with the Nazi occupying forces to twenty years in prison, military degradation, and a ten-million franc fine.

Still hoping to return to Belgium, in 1948 he published *Cavalier Seul* — a revised version of his 1941 autobiography *Herinneringen* (Memories), this time removing anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi statements. The public debate about the collaboration reached a new high point during the so-called Royal Question in 1950, when a popular referendum on the possible return of “the king of collaboration” Leopold III divided the country between northern, right-wing-inclined Flanders and southern, left-wing-inclined Wallonia. The Christian-Democratic government, which sought the unconditional return of the king, faced mass demonstrations, bomb attacks, and an expanding general strike. Eventually the government gave in and Hendrik de Man saw his last chance for rehabilitation disappear along with the abdication of Leopold III. Three years later, de Man died with his wife in Switzerland: their car was hit by a train. According to Stutje, de Man’s lasting willpower and optimism in the final years of his life indicate that this was an accident and not suicide.

## **The Haunting of de Man**

The political legacy of de Man still haunts Belgian social democracy. After World War II, most rank-and-file party members and leftist intellectuals considered the life and work of the former socialist chairman what [Ernest Mandel](#) called “an intellectual tragedy.” Mandel offered the first critical interpretation of de Man in the postwar period, positing that his collaboration and authoritarian sympathies were the consequence of his rejection of Marxism after the First World War, a theoretical shift that was stimulated by his authoritarian personality. Zeev Sternhell’s work *Ni Droit Ni Gauche* (Neither Left nor Right, 1983) generalized this conclusion for the whole of Europe: Marxist revisionism during the 1920s and 1930s led a whole generation of socialists to variants of fascism, ranging from Benito Mussolini in Italy to Marcel Déat in France. However, Mandel warned against such a mechanical and teleological interpretation: an *adieu* to Marxism did not inevitably and automatically lead socialists to fascism. Stutje’s biography follows this line of argument.

After World War II, various political and academic tendencies tried to rehabilitate de Man, starting with the Christian workers' movement, which, inspired by his emphasis on ethics and corporatism, incorporated him into their canon of "great social thinkers." In 1966 the American historian [Peter Dodge](#) wrote the first monograph about the life and work of Hendrik de Man, followed in 1969 by a brief biography by the Dutch theologian Adriaan Van Peski. Only in the 1970s did the life and work of de Man attract the attention of Belgian — and specifically Flemish — scholars. In 1972 the historian Mieke Claeys-Van Haegendoren published her authoritative biography of the socialist leader. The catalyst for a Hendrik de Man revival among a section of Flemish leftist intellectuals was the Colloque International sur l'œuvre d'Henri de Man, an international conference about the work of de Man, which took place in Geneva in 1973. This conference was followed by the publication of an impressive selection of de Man's work in six parts. During the colloquium, the Association pour l'étude de l'œuvre d'Henri de Man (Association for the Study of the Work of Hendrik de Man) was established. The Association [wanted](#) to "test Hendrik de Man's ideas against current events in a scientifically critical way. It goes without saying that no discussion, whatever aspect of his life or work, should be avoided."

In practice, however, prominent members of the Association sympathized with de Man and his ideas. In the best case, this sympathy expressed itself as an appreciation for his ethical socialism and planism as non-Marxist foundations for contemporary socialism. This interpretation framed de Man as a brilliant thinker who made an unfortunate *accident de parcours* in 1940 by collaborating with the Nazis. In this perspective, de Man's core views can be "saved" from a political trajectory that ended in authoritarianism and collaboration — that is, he should be rehabilitated as a pioneer of ethical and culturally "Flemish" socialism, of the European Union, and of the postwar welfare state. In the worst case, sympathy for de Man manifests itself in a personality cult and a fanatical adherence to his ideas. The work of the Swiss historian Michel Brélaz has been the apex of this tendency. Brélaz, who maintained close contact with the Belgian socialist's family, denied that de Man collaborated with the Nazis or that he sympathized with fascism. According to him, the socialist leader was convinced of the imminent victory of Nazism and tried to protect the interests of Belgium and socialism in Hitler's New Order. To Brélaz and his followers, the tragedy of de Man was not his political degeneration, but rather the lack of recognition of his political genius, good intentions, and moral integrity by the post-war socialist movement. The sympathy for de Man is shared in certain obscure Flemish extreme right-wing groups such as the Nieuw-Solidaristisch Alternatief (New Solidaristic Alternative, N-SA).

The renewed academic interest in Hendrik de Man from the 1970s onward was not followed by a rehabilitation in the wider socialist movement. For example, in 2003 the socialist trade union withdrew from a colloquium on de Man because of its hagiographic imaginary and tone, which they equated with a falsification of history. They argued that in the context of rising extreme-right movements the uncritical flirtation with a figure like de Man was unacceptable.

## Critical Reading

Stutje's biography is the first academic work in decades that foregrounds a critical reading of the political and intellectual trajectory of de Man, exposing the contradictions in his thinking: pacifism and patriotism; aversion of and attraction to fascism; admiration for and paternalism toward the working class; respect and contempt for parliamentary democracy. As a historian he recognizes the complex context of the 1930s without absolving de Man from his dubious political choices. Notwithstanding his nuanced appraisal, Stutje does not make the mistake of reducing de Man's political trajectory to a "on the one hand and on the other" story in which the "good" de Man can easily be separated from the "bad." Stutje instead points to the intrinsic problems of Man's thinking, far before his 1940 collaboration. In his Afterword he summarizes these flaws concisely: de Man did not believe in bottom-up socialism and was strongly influenced by elite theories and social Darwinist



views.

Stutje's biographical approach is not without its shortcomings. Firstly, the individual-psychological analysis of de Man's character plays a major role in Stutje's explanation for his authoritarian degeneration, which obstructs a more structural, sociological understanding of "socialist authoritarianism" as a general trend. How can we understand de Man as part of a generation that fell victim to fascist temptations? De Man's "betrayal" can only be understood through a *collective* biography of the interwar "authoritarian left." The fact that several socialist leaders and thinkers followed a similar trajectory in the interwar period puts the individual, psychological factor in perspective and serves as a general warning concerning the temptation of nationalist, state-based "socialism from above" both in the past and the present.

Secondly, although the historian touches upon many of the intellectual debates in the interwar years, he engages in a descriptive historiography and does not conduct a historical analysis of de Man's theories of ethical socialism and planism. This is unfortunate because it is precisely a critique of de Man's theoretical presuppositions that would help us to understand, criticize, and exorcise the [authoritarian, anti-migration, and nationalist tendencies](#) that continue to haunt Western social democracy.

Faced with financial globalization, economic competition, protectionism, and the failure of international cooperation, de Man rejected the possibility of international solidarity and struggle, seeking solutions to the problems of capitalism within the boundaries of the nation-state. Not capital accumulation in itself, but the penetration of alien finance capital, was conceived as the main cause of social disruption. A broad national alliance, capturing state power, appeared as the solution to this problem.

Today, the European welfare state is threatened by similar disruptive forces. Capitalist globalization has stimulated the mobility of capital and its use of "competitive," i.e. cheap labor markets, which undermine the nation-based postwar pacts between labor and capital. Protectionism, not only against cheaply produced commodities but also against labor power (migrants, refugees) appear as logical answers to protect the welfare state. However, this "national socialism" requires the development of force and coercion, not of the international working class against capital, but of the nation-state against competitors and enemies within. De Man's tragic trajectory shows that this kind of "emancipation from above" is a dead end.

As a philosopher, de Man was right to condemn the mummified forms of Marxism that understood socialism as something that was destined to happen regardless of the actions, thoughts, and desires of working people. At the same time, he abandoned the project of turning the masses into a political subject able to emancipate themselves. From that wrong turn flowed his capitulation to the most authoritarian and militaristic plans for marshaling the masses.

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